

Representing traumatic pasts at the District Six Museum¹

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At a conference in 2005, scholar Richard Werbner used two metaphors to describe the work of the District Six Museum: he referred to it as being both 'forum' and 'temple'. Elaborating on this he goes on to say, *'being a temple it has objects which we respect and we're bound to venerate in what they reveal to us about the mystery of human existence. But being a forum, it engages us not merely in the preservation of the past, of remembering what we have forgotten... it engages us in debate, in making demands and claims for the future... it has got to do with argument in public as well as the keeping and safeguarding of the experiences of people who managed to survive very devastating dislocation in their lives.'*¹²

Using this metaphoric framework as a starting point, I would like to focus on the characteristics of the District Six Museum which extend its work beyond being that of *representation* (of traumatic memory). Representation signifies in some ways distance and separation, a telling of a story depicted for others. The work of the Museum is more akin to what could broadly speaking be described as 'engagement'. Although this is word is much over-used, it nonetheless indicates more closely an embodied practice which invites personal insertion, empathy and emplacement. It includes a whole range of

¹ This paper was presented during the seminar **Architecture for memorial sites of conscience**, Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, **28 October 2009**

² Werbner, R. (2005) Paper presented at **Hands On District Six: landscapes of postcolonial memorialisation** Conference, Cape Town. May 2005

sense-making practices by those closest to the Museum's story – the dispossessed ex-residents – who participate in the memorialisation practices of the Museum in both harmonious and dissonant ways. The architectural metaphor of this seminar is key to this approach, indicating a practice which is constructed and layered, fixed yet changeable. It speaks to a spectrum of activities related to the imperatives to develop as well as conserve – elements which are central to the Museum's work in relation to the process of return and restitution. To signify the unfinished business of representation, the permanent exhibition is called *Digging Deeper*, a framework which allows for an always further uncovering of facts, meanings and perspectives.

Encounters in the 'temple'

Engagement with the District Six Museum requires visitors to be 'co-opted' into its story. There is the physical drawing in, onto the central map located on the floor; there is the first-person testimony by ex-resident narrators; and critically, there is the experience and orientation brought by the visitor. A distant visitor who only views the exhibits as a representation of 'the other', or observation of programmatic work by researchers, does not yield a full experience of the Museum's offering. An intimate entering into the physical and metaphoric space is invited by the photographs, the fragments of people's lives and homes, the voices - and as a visitor you are invited to take a position. You are presented with the horror of the forced removal – sometimes in an understated way through the visual and aural media – and you react to it in some way. The floor space often gives rise to feelings of shock, horror, complicity, disbelief, self-recognition and then also the beginnings of healing.

The map

The central map on the floor of the Museum is one of its best known features and I would like to take a moment to reflect on its significance. Faded and worn after many years on the floor, the map continues to be a powerful tool which draws people

physically and symbolically into the centre of the story. Ex-residents who lived in District Six before its destruction, gravitate in the first instance to the street where their homes were situated. The family name is marked where the home once was, serving as a signifier for what once was and had been erased. At the same time, relational others are sought on the map: friends, neighbours, extended family members. On occasion they have even met in person on the map. Main routes are traced with hands and feet, and inevitably a story emerges. This inscription into the symbolic substitute for the land often stimulates an assertion of presence, a statement about the right 'to be'.



Pointing out the family home on the map on the floor of the Museum

Incorrect markings on the map have given rise to serious disorientations as ex-residents often object to their space having been usurped by others. Sometimes the reasons are simply explained: a neighbour with a large handwriting might have inscribed an entire street with one family name; residents might be referring to a different period of having lived at a particular address, and because the map is not drawn to scale and the streets are not proportional to each other: all of these contribute to markers which might not be accurately placed. Whatever the reason, the map continues to be a place of

engagement, of evolving ownership, of debates, affirmations, storytelling and reunions. Intended to be a means to draw ex-residents together when an exhibition opened in 1994 and only meant to be on the floor for a few months, many years later it continues to stimulate and we cannot conceive of lifting it. Together with the objects, recorded voices and ambient sounds that draw visitors into the space, the performance of memory is another important aspect of engagement in the space. Ex-resident storytelling, intergenerational dialogues, role plays, poetry readings, musical performances and dramatic reenactments: these are some of the other ways that visitors might encounter the Museum's work.

The forum

While in the Museum you will find objects that reveal to us aspects of human existence, the ongoing movement which forms a central core of our work is driven by the *forum* part of our identity which takes us beyond the boundaries of the walls. In recent years, the focus of our work has shifted from the production of memory and the commemoration of the 'salted earth' of District Six, to memory work closely associated with land restitution and recovery. This shift to 'hands on' District Six has initiated sets of questions around the methodological integrity of the Museum's practice in relation to work on the site i.e. how does the redevelopment of the site affect the ways in which memory work is practiced, and how do we redefine memory work in relation to a changing site? We have tentatively explored these questions with exresidents on walking interviews through District Six, memory methodology workshops and by documenting both the joys and challenges of the return.

Memory work in the latter context is both difficult and necessary as conflicting emotions and varying approaches to re-settling the site come to the fore. Ex-resident experiences of the site are often as disorienting and alienating as they are triumphal, and the re-mapping of the site through participatory forms of memorialisation needs to heed these experiences.



Students on a site walk locating their place on a map of the vacant site

Conservation Management Plan

One of the projects that has moved us substantially beyond the boundaries of the building has been the development of a Conservation Management Plan (CMP)² for the vacant site in preparation for an application to have it declared as a National Heritage Site. This was an opportunity to work closely with the community who are intimately tied to the site and its story, and to draw on the many different elements of an evolving methodology, developed over the years.

A CMP is potentially a very sterile, technical document which generally focuses on strategies for conservation and preservation of sites. The District Six CMP was unique in some ways: given that the site to be conserved was also one which was in the process of being developed, careful consideration had to be given to what this would mean. In addition, we were determined that the process of producing this document should be continuous with the Museum's methods of working 'in community' and should not stand apart from it. A challenging yet substantially enriching set of engagements evolved from this.

The physical conservation of the site is aided by the attention to the preservation of sites identified by ex- and current residents as specific sites of memory. This is linked to a re-insertion / re-assertion of the *act* of identifying,³ re-marking and memorialising potential sites. In these acts of making meaning of their past, strategies of public interaction and participation (within the broader context of the land restitution process), become focal communitydriven memorial practices, and occur in conjunction with acts of remembrance shaped and given voice in private spaces. The intention of the CMP is to provide a framework through which the public and private memorial practices are acknowledged and contribute to the intangible, yet living. In this context, the Museum forms part of an 'engaged public' - a 'diverse body of people joined together in ever changing alliances to make choices about how to advance their common well-being'. It seeks public engagements which allow for a 'committed and interrelated citizenry rather than a persuaded populace' (Matthews 2002: p.i).⁴

This reflects the emergence of an active civic culture that asserts that public education is not solely confined to dialogue or 'teaching' between institutions and communities, but is inherent in the formal and informal methods of reminiscence - performance, music, reunions and exhibitions - that the District Six community uses at their discretion. Through the exchange of stories, experiences, photographs and other expressions of memory, an exchange of knowledge is effected and public ownership of the spaces of District Six is reasserted.

Mediating traumatic memories

³ 2 This was submitted by the District Six Museum to the national council of the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) in 2006

⁴ Mathews, D. (2002). **For Communities to Work** (Kettering Foundation Press: USA)

Reunions have been a key way through which ex-resident communities have sought to re-assert and experience those aspects of their individual and group identity as it was shaped by the broader community and institutions of District Six.



The vacant site of District Six

Organised in or outside the space of the museum, reunions are a way of re-establishing links between people whose relation to each other has been fractured and which subsequently seeks to create alternative means of refiguring itself. The resolve of individual residents to assemble groups of former residents in the aesthetic space of the museum and more recently in institutions located on the site of District Six embodies a shift in the forms of engagement with the memory of the District beyond that of reminiscence and towards public education and ownership of the site. *Oral histories* The practice of collecting life histories and oral histories is characterised by community acts of recognition, reminiscence and telling that happens in the space of the Museum and

within communities. These acts form part of a memory methodology that recognises the authority and expertise of exresidents in *how* they narrate and perform their memories, and how they choose to *represent* their histories. This engagement with memory is a key organising principle of the Museum, and is often brought about by donations.

Receiving artefacts into the archive is premised on the notion that the associational value of the artefact, namely the stories and memories it evokes, are as important as the object itself. These oral histories contribute to a living memory around the object which, when seen in relation to other artefacts and stories in the Museum, allows for the formation of a living archive – refigured through public participation as a space where knowledge is co-created by interviewees and the Museum. The knowledge that we help to create should not only build an archive ‘that knows’, but should also contribute towards building social knowledge and ownership of sites and spaces from which people have been dispossessed. Oral history narrations are therefore much more than research data: they are also opportunities for interviewees to reinsert themselves into the story of a city which has systematically disconnected them from its perimeters.

Memory walks

Nadia Seremetakis (2000:4), reflecting on the workings of memory in contexts of trauma says that ‘Memory ... has social and sensory coordinates that are part of the living membrane of the city ... found embedded and miniaturized in objects that trigger deep emotions and narratives ... linked to sounds, aromas and sights. We take this enmeshed memory for granted until the material supports that stitch memory to person and place are torn out from under us, when these spaces suddenly vanish under debris...’



Ex-resident at the site of her former home which is now buried beneath the foundations of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Some of the site walks undertaken with ex-residents were extremely disorienting, particularly for those whose 'social



Ex-residents mapping out familiar routes and landmarks on an old street

and sensory coordinates' had been obliterated. The reality of having to relate to a newly-configured space was sometimes traumatic, but usually resulted in an eventual sense of spatial

Conclusion

These are just some of the ways in which the citizens of Cape Town have been involved in thinking about engaging with their own traumatic histories, and with representation in one project of the Museum. The application to have District Six declared a National Heritage Site set into motion a series of commitments which had the potential of alienating the Museum from its primary participant base. Lessons learnt from the way in which the Museum itself has had to evolve to accommodate a growing tourist public has provided the organisation with some valuable experience in this regard.

The declaration, when made official, will not be the end of the process but will signal another milestone in the ongoing commitment to remain 'in community'. This has become increasingly difficult in current times in which we observe the global phenomenon of communities becoming more and more alienated, tending to veer more towards becoming spectators more than participants in like it, the Museum strives to remain as an alternative space of interaction whose aim it is to contribute towards growing a public which will continue to actively seek and make opportunities to insert its voices into the fabric of life in its broadest sense.

About the author:

Bonita Bennett was appointed as director of the District Six Museum in June 2008, having been the acting director for nine months prior to that. She had worked variously as the Museum's collections manager and the research co-ordinator since 2001, having a particular research interest in narrative and memory. Her professional training is as a high school English teacher. She completed a BA at UCT in 1982, and a Higher Diploma in Education in 1984. After many years of working as a teacher, educational NGO coordinator and researcher, she went back to UCT to complete her M.Phil in Applied Sociolinguistics and achieved that in 2005. Her dissertation focused on narratives of trauma of people who had been forcibly removed from various areas.